

Lalage Bown: The Enduring Legacy. A Personal Reflection

Richard Taylor

Abstract:

This personal reflection of Lalage Bown focuses upon her professional contributions internationally to the field of progressive adult and continuing education, and her remarkable personality and charisma. Although the contexts for her work varied considerably over her many decades of activism and leadership, the values underpinning her approach remained constant. The chapter begins by outlining the nature of these guiding principles, and then considers her intellectual achievements, as exemplified in her 1994 Lecture on Radical Social Purpose Adult Education. Lalage had, by common consent, a memorable 'presence' as a public speaker, and this rare talent is discussed and some examples given. The chapter concludes with some personal reminiscences, which try to give a flavour of her unforgettable character; and some suggestions about some (realistic) policy priorities which Lalage might be campaigning for in the 2020s.

Keywords: Adult Education; Charisma; Personality; Principles; Social Purpose

Introduction

The impressive range of Lalage Bown's professional life and achievements, over many years, has been well described and analysed by other contributors in this book. Even more important than the range, however, are the moral and political values that shine through in all Lalage's work. The contexts may, indeed do, change radically: but the values remain constant.

This final, brief, chapter should begin with a personal 'semi-disclaimer': I knew Lalage over many years, and liked, respected and admired her, both as an influential and committed adult educator and, latterly, as a friend. But I was not a *close* friend or confidante. My reflections here are thus those of someone in her world but not in her immediate, intimate circle.

The structure of this chapter is as follows. I begin with an attempt to delineate the central values that constituted Lalage's commitment to adult education. I then discuss her considerable achievements as an academic, with reference to one particular publication with which I was personally, albeit marginally, involved: her 1994 Albert Mansbridge Memorial Lecture, delivered at the University of

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Leeds, where I was then Director of Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning. This nicely demonstrates Lalage's erudition, applied to specific policy issues, with typically measured but uncompromising radicalism.

The greatest impact Lalage had, however, was through her abilities as a motivational speaker. Nobody in our field had a greater 'presence' or a more intuitive, emotional connection with her audience – whether that be of adult students (both in the UK and Africa) or of fellow Senators at the University of Glasgow. After attempting to crystallise this striking aspect of Lalage's persona, I recall a couple of personal recollections, which seem to me to typify her style and personality. In conclusion, I suggest some lines of future policy development for adult education, which I hope build upon the values that Lalage held so dear.

1. Values

The core values of radical, social purpose adult education, of which Lalage was such a notable exponent and practitioner, are arguably based on four inter-related principles. Firstly, there is an *a priori* belief in a participative, informed democracy as being the foundation of the 'good society'. Such democracy, certainly in its currently extant form anywhere in the real world of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, is a deeply flawed system – and there is much truth, in my view, in the caveats advanced by left socialists about 'bourgeois democracy' (Miliband 1982, 1994). Nevertheless, it needs emphasising that, imperfect though it is as a political and social system, there is no viable alternative. The sorry history of the Marxist-Leninist experiment bears eloquent testament to the dangers of 'vanguardist' attempts at a 'short cut' (Benn 1981).

Secondly, any democracy worth the name has to have commitments to both the principles of 'equality' and 'fellowship' (Tawney 1952¹; Taylor and Steele 2011; Goldman 2013). For a vibrant, participative democracy a much greater equalisation of wealth and income, to be achieved largely through redistributive taxation, is essential – and the importance of taxing wealth as well as income is key in the modern context, given its unprecedented concentration in the richest 5% to 10% of the population in capitalist societies (Picketty 2013). «Equality», as Tawney explained, should not be construed as «equality of opportunity»: this, he noted, in effect means «merely equal opportunities to be unequal». On the contrary, he argued, socialists should aim to «effect a complete divorce between differences of pecuniary income and differences in respect of health, security, amenity of environment, culture, social status and esteem»

¹ R.H. Tawney was a well-known, and greatly respected, social and economic historian of modern Britain. He was a lifelong advocate and practitioner of liberal adult education, especially as practised through the Workers Educational Association (WEA). He wrote several influential books and was a leading member of many Government Royal Commissions. He was a lifelong socialist and an active Christian in the Church of England (the biography, by Lawrence Goldman, provides reliable detail and analysis of Tawney's contributions to adult education and his intellectual perspectives generally).

(Tawney 1952 [1931], 178-79). The commitment to ‘fellowship’ was equally important. Human beings are social animals. Despite the dominance of individualist culture, the increasingly isolating society of the ‘internet age’, and, in the educational context, the overwhelming emphasis upon crudely instrumental, vocational provision, the fundamental need and desire for collective, mutually supportive, and collegial educational experience remains foundational to the adult education culture.

Thirdly, as Richard Hoggart has observed, «open democracies must have critically-literate citizens» (1992, 5). It is here that we move away from the generic, political values of the radical educator, which apply to the wider society, to values which focus specifically upon the role of adult education *per se* in the context of developing a vibrant, inclusive, and participative democracy. Absolutely central to this perspective is the belief that critical adult education, engaged in and with a large proportion of the population, has the potential to challenge and, at the very least, ameliorate the manifest injustices and unfairness that characterise contemporary liberal democratic societies.

All questions are open questions, and arguments from all ideological perspectives must be explored, analysed and contested (radical adult educators would do well to bear in mind Karl Marx’s favourite motto: «Doubt everything»). Moreover, it is of crucial importance that adult education should not degenerate into hectoring polemic and political propaganda. Whilst adult educators should always be constructively critical of the prevailing norms and ideological assumptions of society, this should never have the objective of ‘converting’ adult students to a particular ideological belief, whether religious or political. Rather, the task should be seen as enabling adult students to find their own way to their own conclusions. This must involve, *inter alia*, providing students with the methodological tools to enable them to identify well-grounded evidence, as opposed to ill-informed prejudice; and to ensure that relevant sources are identified which are from ideological perspectives which differ from both the students’ and tutor’s own. At times this may, indeed should, be ‘uncomfortable’; but that is, it is argued, the only way to arrive at an informed set of opinions which, however firmly held, encompass an understanding and tolerance of differing perspectives.

A final, foundational value, which flows from the latter and was of particular importance in Lalage’s life and work, is the role of adult education in countering the predilections towards prejudicial attitudes in Western societies, whether this be of racist or ethnic perspectives, or sexist and especially misogynistic positions. There are of course many ways to try to eradicate these damaging and irrational beliefs. Political mobilisation and demonstration is one such, and at times the most appropriate and effective. But, in the end, it is education that provides the only long term solution. In times of political or economic crisis, it is all too easy for extremists, especially right-wing extremists, to ‘scapegoat’ minorities by appealing to innate prejudices against ‘the other’. The classic, and most horrific, example is of course the persecution and mass murder of Europe’s Jewish population by the Nazi regime in the 1930s and 1940s. But it also applies to

the long and variegated history of the legacy of European (and later, American) colonialism and the racism that was one of its primary characteristics. It was in this latter context – specifically British colonial rule in Africa and its aftermath – that Lalage played such an important and prominent role, as other authors in this book have described and illustrated.

All such prejudiced attitudes are based upon irrational and uninformed emotions, which result from feelings of alienation, disempowerment, and consequently of being culturally threatened. This applies as much to homophobia, misogyny and Islamophobia (or for that matter, eugenics) as it does to racist or ethnic prejudice. To repeat the point made above: the solution is always the inculcation of more informed, tolerant perspectives through engagement with evidence-based counter arguments and open-ended discussion. In many contexts, including the colonial and post-colonial environments in which Lalage spent so much of her professional life, this entails introducing adult students to arguments, perspectives and sources, which are counter-cultural. In the specific context of Africa in the latter half of the twentieth century, this meant enabling students to have access to radical, anti-colonial, narratives and the evidence upon which these were based.

Moreover, as Amia Srinivasan has noted, there is «a robust sociological finding that the more education a person receives, the likelier they are to lean left; by the same token, less education is correlated with political conservatism and thus to the prejudicial attitudes referred to» (2023, 6); this goes a long way to explaining the funding initiatives for universities in the USA by such explicitly right-wing bodies as the Koch Foundation, in order to ensure that universities appoint predominantly conservative presidents and trustees.

This characteristic of radical adult education is also closely related to the more general Mansbridgean principle of ‘education for education’s sake’: the sheer joy of learning. Enabling adult students to experience and appreciate the finest achievements of human culture – whether of literature, art, the sciences, or music – is one of the most worthwhile, enjoyable, and satisfying aspects of adult education provision.

2. Research and Publication

In the British context, the priority for radical adult educators has rightly been the devising and delivery of high quality, sensitively designed and innovative curricula for widely divergent communities of adult students. Lalage, committed as she was to adult education as a means of transformative enlightenment at both the individual and societal levels, was no exception to this generalisation.

However, it should be emphasised that many of the best radical adult educators were also active and effective in the field of research and publication. The extensive references throughout this book to publications by ‘Bown, L.’ provide eloquent testimony to her status as an accomplished scholar. However, running through all her research work is the imperative of seeing the primary purpose of academic research as providing the basis for meaningful educational – and by

implication, social and political – change. Abstract theorising was not for her. Rather, the primary questions were always ‘what use is it, for both the individual and the wider society?’; ‘how will it enhance good practice?’; and ‘what are the positive policy implications?’

Here, I focus upon just one of Lalage’s publications, which I believe illustrates both her scholarship and her commitment to the principles underlying radical adult education. In November 1994, she delivered, at the University of Leeds, the fifteenth Albert Mansbridge Lecture, entitled *Learning, Liberty and Social Purpose: A Reminder of Our Radical Liberal Inheritance in Adult Education and Some Thoughts on Its Future* (Bown 1995). Her objectives in this lecture were threefold: «to review the concept of the relation of learning to democracy; to renew the debate about the role of voluntary learning organisations within a democratic country, and to suggest how we might build on the Mansbridge and WEA inheritance for the twenty-first century» (1995, 1).

Lalage begins by reminding us of Mansbridge’s vision for the WEA², and his belief in the necessary connections between a viable democracy and «access to knowledge, and to habits of critical thought», and equality and freedom of association, all in the context of his commitment to «voluntarism». She goes on to emphasise that, whilst we «have to shape our own vision [...] we need to draw on our inheritance [...] to learn about the issues of our time and to judge them on the basis of logic and articulated principles, rather than prejudice» (1995, 2-3).

At the heart of Lalage’s lecture is an extended and erudite discussion of the importance of John Milton to this radical inheritance. As Lalage notes, Milton’s immense reputation as one of England’s greatest poets, sometimes obscures his considerable role as a republican, radical and libertarian activist and writer. She draws attention to his belief that: «‘where there is much to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions; for opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making’» (1995, 4).

Milton focused attention not only on the importance of ‘freedom’ *per se* but foreshadowed later twentieth-century discussion of the crucial distinction between ‘freedom *from*’ and ‘freedom *to*’, emphasising the importance of the ‘social contract’ implied by the latter (see Berlin 1958, for the classic modern discussion of this issue).

The two principles of Milton’s *Areopagitica* on which Lalage concentrates, have particular purchase upon the principles and practice of contemporary radical adult education. Milton advocates the widest possible access to knowledge

² The WEA (Workers’ Educational Association) was founded in 1903 in the UK, by Albert Mansbridge, as a voluntary body whose purpose was to enable working class men and women to have access to the full range of educational opportunities, with a particular focus upon the arts, humanities and social studies. It was, and remains, characterised by a local branch structure, with many thousands of learners and Branch members, supported by a small cohort of professional full-time adult educators. During the twentieth century, the WEA spread to Australia and Canada.

and that «it should not be shut away from the people [...]. Only by the opportunity to exercise judgements can learners develop discrimination» (Bown 1995, 4). Secondly, Milton advocates an unrestricted curriculum. As he puts it: «‘Truth and understanding are not such wares as to be monopolised and traded by tickets and statutes and standards’» (1995, 5). Today’s university managers, and the bureaucracies responsible for Inspection and Quality Assurance, would do well to heed his strictures!

Lalage contrasts Milton’s refreshingly open-ended and challenging perspective with the ‘restrictiveness’ of the current institutional and national structures for adult education and the ‘unpalatability’, for many adult learners, of such an approach.

In typical Lalage fashion, she concludes with a telling reference to Wordsworth’s famous sonnet:

Milton, thou shouldst be living at this hour
England hath need of thee: she is a fen
Of stagnant waters ... (1995, 7)

If this was true in 1994-95, how much more it is the case in 2023. Moreover, if the richer countries of the developed world are unable to fulfil these essential educational objectives, how much more difficult is the task in the Global South?

Lalage emphasises the intrinsic, democratic benefits of voluntarism in adult education, in a variety of contexts, including the importance of ‘sociability’ of «coming together to learn in common, with the motive of meeting others, gaining a sense of affiliation» (1995, 9), thus countering the tendencies in modern societies to social atomisation and alienation.

Drawing on her experience of varied adult education contexts in Africa and Asia, Lalage argues that, although modern mass media (to which we must add in the twenty-first century, ‘social media’) may offer «sophisticated and often highly attractive» documentaries and the like, only the collective, mutually supportive, adult education group «can mobilise people for change» (1995, 11).

What then is missing in adult education in the contemporary world? Lalage’s view is clear: «We have a sad lack still [...] of *political* education on any scale» (1995, 12). She cites other comparable developed societies where national governments provide financial support for (non-partisan) such education – Germany and Denmark, for example. Perhaps, Lalage suggests, this could lead in the UK to the creation of an enlarged Adult Education Forum, «with authenticity as representative of adult learners [...] [with] a strong remit for educational change [...]» (1995, 12-13).

Reminding us of the importance of seeing adult education always as a *movement*, Lalage makes in conclusion a series of radical, but practical, recommendations for policy initiatives. First, echoing Raymond Williams, Lalage stresses that education is about constant enquiry, and we should be «questioning the orthodoxies of our day» (1995, 14). Citing August Bebel, Lalage notes that

«the free market is just ‘the free fox in the hen-run’» (1995, 14). Moreover, in the mid-1990s as now, the UK spent a significantly smaller proportion of its GDP per capita upon education (and indeed on health) than almost all comparable developed societies. Secondly, adult education should be linked more to community development. ‘Good practice’ examples – of adult education with unemployed people, with ethnic minority communities and with a range of disadvantaged sections of the wider society – should be built upon and extended. Thirdly, and clearly dear to Lalage’s heart, adult education should be «reaching out internationally» (1995, 15), making the best use, *inter alia*, of the opportunities offered by the dissemination of IT. And, finally, linked to this, Lalage recommends that, in the internet age, we should institute «a whole new adult curriculum of critical appraisal of national and international communication, using as a starting-point the work done in some universities in media studies» (1995, 16). This would involve, amongst other issues, rigorous analysis of the ideological implications of the restricted ownership structures of such mass media outlets (re-reading this almost thirty years later, its prescience and contemporary applicability are striking).

In conclusion, Lalage brings us back to the inspiring Miltonic ideal of ‘free and open learning for all’ and ‘the Mansbridge ideal of learning for a social purpose’.

The combination in this Lecture of erudition that is highly relevant to the radical case that is being argued, with well-founded, radical and realistic policy recommendations, typifies in my view Lalage’s talents as both a committed professional and an attractive warm persona. Other examples of her work could of course be given: but I hope that enough is evident here to demonstrate Lalage’s scholarly status and her commitment to ensuring that research had a real world, radical effect.

3. Personal Impact

No-one who has had the privilege of hearing Lalage speak in a public forum can ever forget her ‘presence’, her gift for inspiring oratory or the hard-headed but appealing commitment to her deeply held principles. It is, however, notoriously difficult to convey such qualities through the written word. Although Lalage necessarily played upon a smaller, more focused, stage, her qualities in this context bear comparison with such luminaries as Aneurin Bevan, Martin Luther King Junior, and Maya Angelou. The very few people who have such talents somehow ‘hold’ their audience: there is a magnetism, akin to that of a great actor in the theatre. This is an elusive, and precious, quality: and Lalage had it in abundance – and in a variety of contexts. For example, several colleagues have recalled the standing ovation that Lalage received from Glasgow University’s Senate (as detailed in an earlier chapter). Similarly, I have been present at several national adult education conferences and seminars when Lalage’s contribution was received with unusual acclamation. ‘Charisma’ is a greatly overused word: but, without doubt, Lalage had it – once heard, never forgotten.

4. Personal Recollections

As I said earlier, I was a longstanding colleague, and latterly a friend, of Lalage Bown. Here, I recall just two of many memories – one professional, the other, personal – of my interactions with Lalage.

The first can be quite briefly described. I was giving a paper at a well-attended adult education conference in Oxford, in, I think, the early 1990s. The topic of my paper was (as perhaps too often!) radical social purpose adult education. The first contribution to the subsequent discussion was from Lalage. She began by expressing general agreement with the position taken; but then forcefully (and accurately) pointed to the dangers of arrogating to adult education alone the radical ideology that underpinned our perspective. This was not only erroneous but dangerous, she maintained. We needed to be aware, and to acknowledge, our debts to a range of intellectual and political forebears: Milton, J.S. Mill, numerous socialists and social movement activists and so on. She was absolutely right: and I appreciated her forthright, informed but collegial corrective; and it was 'a lesson' that I hope I have never forgotten.

The personal recollection is from a much later period, when Lalage was in her 80s and not in the best of health. Lalage came, by train, to visit my partner and me in our lake District home. As it happened, my partner, a much closer friend of Lalage's, was called away to a meeting in London. So I collected Lalage from the railway station in the late afternoon. It transpired that she had had to stand for much of the lengthy journey. I was concerned for her health and, after the short drive home, I asked her if she would like a rest («No thanks»); perhaps a cup of tea? («No thanks»). Maybe a glass of one of her favourite whiskies («Yes, please!»). Conversation flowed: the state of adult education; the dire state of British national politics; some personal/professional 'gossip'; and much else. A memorable evening. The next day, after my partner returned, Lalage revealed that she had done her local research, and asked whether we might visit a Church, some 15 miles away. There, she informed us, a notable artist, Ann Macbeth, originally from the Glasgow School of Art, where she had studied in the early 1900s, who had moved in middle age to the Lakes, had designed a series of very striking embroidered hangings for the church. We spent a fascinating hour or two admiring these and learning about the artist and her work. Yet another example of Lalage's seeking out fulfilling learning at every opportunity³.

³ Ann Macbeth (1875-1948), who attended Glasgow School of Art, graduating in 1901, was a distinguished embroiderer. Her 'Good Shepherd' hangs opposite a printed reproduction of her 'Patterdale Nativity' in St. Patrick's Church, Patterdale. She was a supporter and campaigner for the Women's Suffrage movement in the early twentieth century and her designs were used for several of the Suffragette banners. This whole episode is indicative of Lalage's determination – even when she was approaching 90 years of age – to enlist two professors as 'adult education students'!

Concluding Observations: 'What Would Lalage Do?'

What policy lessons, then, can we learn from this remarkable and much loved adult educator? As noted at the outset, the contexts change in fundamental ways in different eras, but the values remain constant. In our present, frankly dire, times what policy options, realistically, would Lalage advocate?

Two obvious objectives can be asserted without any doubt. First, the catastrophic destruction over recent decades of adult education in the UK – in Further Education (FE) even more than in Higher Education (HE) – *has* to be reversed. The policies of the Conservative governments, in the adult education context as in much else, have been inexcusable and deeply damaging and destructive. This is hardly any longer a party political point: most sensible Conservatives acknowledge this, at least 'off the record'. Secondly, the reduction of what remains of adult education provision to crudely instrumental vocationalism, in the context of an increasingly marketised FE and HE system, also has to be reversed, and quickly.

Important though these are, they are essentially remedial. What of the radical adult education that Lalage (and many of the rest of us) advocated? Three (realistic) recommendations, in Lalage's 'tradition', might be hazarded. Firstly, and quite simply, there should be a recognition that adult education needs *dedicated funding* (this applies in Britain to both the FE and HE sectors: but is also an international problem). Without this, it will disappear altogether with incalculable negative effects upon the democratic polity, in Britain as elsewhere. Secondly, the drift to an exclusive concentration upon instrumental vocational education has to be broadened to include centrally Lalage's suggestion for imaginative, democratic and relevant, open-ended political education. The central contribution of critical liberal adult education to the democratic polity has to be foregrounded – and institutionally and financially recognised. Thirdly, the international dimension of adult education, which Lalage did so much to prioritise, has to be again brought to the fore, especially in the xenophobic post-Brexit world of the early twenty-first century.

In these difficult times, Lalage's life, professional and personal commitments, and sheer moral example, will continue to inspire adult educators and many others in the UK, in Africa, and in many other parts of the world.

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